

INITIATION Acts 9.20-31

I. Fascination, v. 20-22

I am sure that all of us have had an expectation of some event or some person that did not turn out just as we had thought it might. There are times when those differences between our expectations and actual events were great disappointments.

Then there are those other times when we are pleasantly surprised that things turned out to be so much greater than we could ever have imagined.

The church at Damascus was a small fellowship of new believers. The gospel message that had been delivered from Jerusalem had affected the hearts of many of the Jews who recognized that Jesus of Nazareth was, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah.

Without fully understanding the impact it would have on their lives they had nonetheless acknowledged the lordship of Jesus Christ and were in the fledgling days of a new experience when they got some news that they were not pleased to hear.

As you may remember from the earlier verses in Acts, many believers had fled the city of Jerusalem to avoid punishments, imprisonments, and even the risk of death for their recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, and had brought with them to Damascus tales of the persecution that had erupted in the holy city.

Now, the persecutors were following in the footsteps of the dispersed Christians, and it was soon announced that the chief of all persecutors, Saul of Tarsus, was soon to arrive in the city of Damascus.

Nearing the city where he intended to capture those who professed the name of Jesus, Saul was himself captured by the power of the Holy Spirit – arrested by the sight of the resurrected Jesus standing before him in all of His glory and demanding Saul's attention.

Instead of coming in at the head of a team of men looking for believers to arrest, Saul entered, led by that same team, able to see nothing, having been blinded by the hand of God as he approached the city. At first, their fear remained, but as the next few days passed, the believers in Damascus began to realize that something marvelous had taken place on the road that led from Jerusalem to their city.

Saul had encountered the living Savior and had been called by Him to salvation and to service.

Such a thing was hard to fathom, as you might expect, so the people were amazed when they heard this same Saul – this chief persecutor commissioned by the chief priests to come here for the purpose of destroying those who called on the name of Jesus – now himself preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

II. Preparation, Gal. 1.15-19

Somewhere in this part of the narrative, Luke leaves out a very important event in the life of Paul that we do not find out about until we read from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia.

It should not surprise us that Luke left this out. There are certainly many things in the life of Paul that Luke did not include for lack of room in the narrative and for various other reasons.

It is the same for the Gospel story. The last verse in the Gospel of John...

John 21:25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

While this Book may contain all of the revelation of God that He intended for us to have during our earthly tenure, it by no means exhausts the extent of the knowledge of the God who was, and is, and always will be.

He is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, and we deceive ourselves when we assume to understand all that there is to know about His works and His ways.

Galatians 1:15 *But when it pleased God, who separated (appointed) me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, 16a To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen (ethnos, nations)...*

Remember that Saul had been a "Pharisee of Pharisees." The word Pharisee meant "separated one." Saul had been a separatist – one who kept himself apart from the general population of Jews – now separated – appointed – by Christ to be God's messenger to the nations.

Notice also that God appointed Paul to be an apostle, called him to salvation, and revealed His Son in Paul all for His own pleasure – not Paul's pleasure, but God's pleasure.

Everything that had happened in Paul's life that had brought him to this point of conversion and consecration was by the hand of God for God's own pleasure.

Jeremiah – **Jer. 1:5** *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.* (ESV)

John the Baptist – **Luke 1.13, 15** *The angel said to Zechariah, "...your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."* (ESV)

Jesus – **Isaiah 49:1** *The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. 5 And now the LORD, who formed (pre-ordained) me from the womb to be his servant, says to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him...*

Luke 1:31 *And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.*

Galatians 1.16b *...immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: 17 Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.*

We do not know how long Saul was in Arabia. We do know, from **verse 18**, that the combined time from his conversion until he went to Jerusalem was a total of three years (**Gal. 1.18**).

I read a sermon that said that God sent Saul into the desert of Arabia to the school of solitude. Another said he attended the school of the Spirit.

In **2 Cor. 12**, Paul tells of having been translated into the third heaven (wherever that may be), but he was not sure if it was a bodily experience or a spiritual experience.

Whatever the case may be, while he was there in this place he referred to as "Paradise," he heard things said that no man has the power to put into words, which man is not permitted to speak.

When he returned to Damascus, he continued to preach the message of Jesus – that He was the true Messiah. He spoke with a power and with an authority and with knowledge that confounded the Jews of Damascus.

That word "confound" means that his teaching "disturbed" their minds, stirred up a tumult and an outbreak of confusion – so much so that the Jews sought to kill him. If they couldn't overcome his teaching with their own knowledge, they would simply get rid of him.

III. Persecution, v. 23-25

It is interesting for us to note that all of these events of Acts did not take place in a historical vacuum. In other words, it is easy for us to "biblical tunnel vision" and forget that there were things going on in the world other than the stories of the Bible.

The biblical story takes place in history, and we need to be reminded often that history is "His Story." The events of the world are simply God moving forward among men the plan that He has already set in place for the world.

It's uncertain exactly what year Saul was converted, but it was sometime near the year 34 AD. A significant event which took place around that time was the death of Herod Philip in 35 AD.

This left a vacuum of power in Syria and led to a war between Herod Antipas and his former father-in-law, Aretas IV, king of the Nabateans, who ruled the region of Arabia. The Nabateans were the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar.

Herod Antipas and King Aretas were already at odds with one another because of the insult by Herod Antipas. Herod divorced his wife, the daughter of King Aretas, so that he could marry his sister-in-law, Herodias (the mother of Salome who danced for Herod and whose request resulted in the beheading of John the Baptist).

The war between them lasted from 2 to 2½ years with Aretas coming out on top. This is significant because it was during this time of war that Saul sent into the desert of Arabia for his personal encounter with Christ.

The governor of Damascus was most likely in power as a result of an appointment by King Aretas. The Nabatean-controlled governor allied with the Jews to kill Saul, though the reason for the alliance is not made clear in Scripture.

The gates were watched and an effort was made to capture and kill Saul. Somehow, Saul and his companions found out about the plot and, taking advantage of a window in a wall of a house that made up part of the wall that surrounded Damascus...

...Paul was let down in a basket during the night and escaped, retracing the steps along the Damascus Road that he had traveled three years earlier.

IV. Recognition, v. 26-28,

Now Saul is back among familiar surroundings – the city he had lived in since he was a young boy – where he had gone to school at the feet of Gamaliel in the school of Hillel – where he had become a Pharisee and had served the high priest.

When he left, he had been a name to reckon with – a staunch defender of the faith, zealous for the Law and for the purity of Jewish custom.

But the church knew him as the great persecutor who had stood by consenting unto the execution of Stephen and who had been commissioned by the chief priests to travel the country with the warrant to arrest all who were of the faith.

Now that he has returned, they continue to fear him and to doubt his conversion.

We do not know how Barnabas came to know Saul or how he came to believe his testimony. But we do know that he did and that it was Barnabas who challenged the fears and doubts of the other believers and the apostles and stood up for Saul.

Eventually, Barnabas was able to persuade the apostles of the genuineness of Saul's conversion and **verse 28** indicates that "he was admitted to their friendship, and recognized as a Christian and an apostle." (Barnes)

Yet Saul's time in Jerusalem would be relatively short.

Galatians 1.18 *Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. 19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother.*

It would seem that all the apostles except Peter and James were either not available for fellowship during Saul's stay in Jerusalem or the Saul specifically chose to spend time with Peter.

It is certain that Saul knew who Peter was. He may have been present at the arrests and trials and beating of Peter. There was much to talk about certainly.

Yet there was preaching to be done.

V. Expansion, v. 29-31

Once again, the message of the gospel was always the same: Paul "spoke boldly in the name of Jesus."

Paul preached about the person of Jesus – the long-expected Messiah promised since the days of Adam – and he preached about the power of Jesus and His authority over sin and death.

And once again, the message of Christ had the effect of angering those who are opposed to the message – who sought to quiet the proclamation of the name of Jesus.

These were those same Grecians who had formerly been Saul's ally against those who profaned the glory of being a Jew by following the teachings of Jesus and proclaiming Him Lord.

These are the same Grecians who tolerated the wisdom and teaching of Stephen only as until they realized that there was no answer to his wisdom or to the truth of his message, so they killed him.

And now they seek the same result with Saul.

Yet, as with all other aspects of this story, Christ demonstrates that He, not man, is in control of the events of history.

Acts 22.17 When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him (Jesus) saying to me, "Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me." (ESV)

Other Christian brothers helped him to escape from Jerusalem, ushered him to the coastal city of Caesarea, and put him on a ship back to his hometown of Tarsus.

And for now, Saul drops off of the scene for a time – at least in the book of Acts – though he does not drop out of the ministry. Paul himself explains in ***Galatians 1.21-24*** that he continued to preach and most likely to plant churches in the regions of Cilicia (the capital of which was his hometown of Tarsus) and Syria (whose capital was Antioch).

And for a time, the church is at peace. The church continued to grow and to fear the Lord and to be comforted by the Holy Spirit. And the number of disciples was multiplied.